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"The Handy Man on Sax"

International Jazz Musician

John Handy, Jr.
Pass Christian

A Pictorial Documentary
by Dan Ellis
February 2001

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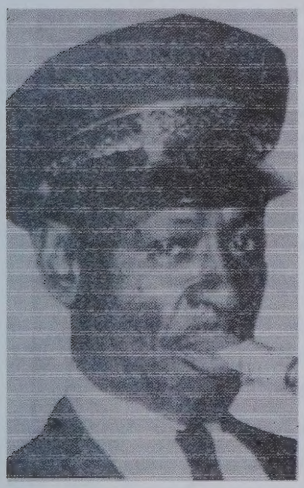
Captain John Handy

Sax Altoist, Clarinetist

Pass Christian's Little Known Internationally Famous Jazz Great

In April 1970, when the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival was then celebrated as a 3-day weekend, events were held mainly in the Municipal Auditorium and at Beauregard Square that fronted the auditorium. Top billing was Mahalia Jackson and Captain Handy. Mahalia soulfully sang "Down by the Riverside," "Precious Lord Take My Hand," "Deep as the Sea," and other gospel standards. Captain John Handy lead his jazz group, "Handy's Louisiana Shakers" into many of his well known recorded pieces.

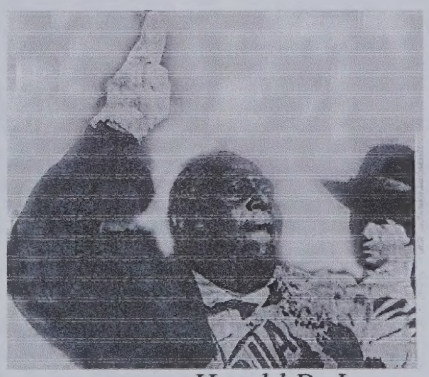
Now famous, Ellis Marsalis was just making his first introductions to fans as he played his piano with a group called the "All Stars." At that time, Friday night performances were held in the Municipal Auditorium; Saturday activities at noon, opened with a street parade lead by the Eureka Brass Band that brought everyone to hear the open air performances in Beauregard Square. Saturday evening performances were with Al Hirt, Duke Ellington and others in the Auditorium. Sundays were staged with impromptu music sessions mixed with Blues, Cajun, and Gospel choirs held in Beauregard Square with food and crafts available.



That was Captain Handy's last Jazz Fair, he died at age 70 in Pass Christian, just a few days after sitting in with his Pass friends as he played some of his favorite jazz and blues.

The Captain actually had two funeral observances. The first was at New Orleans where his body was taken to the Rhodes Funeral Home on North Claiborne Avenue to be waked for his many City friends. The following day his body was returned to Pass Christian for a second well-attended wake at Goodwill Baptist Church. Handy's church, St. Paul's United Methodist was still under repair due to Hurricane Camille damages which occurred just six months before. Handy had described *"Camille"* as the bluest note he had ever heard.

Harold DeJean, head of the *Olympia Brass Band,* echoed out, "We come to lay him down right!" The ritual is a tradition for New Orleans old musicians that seldom varies. The band lead the hearse in a somber funereal march to the cemetery, playing hymns all along the way. The lead trumpet rolled out the first notes of *"Closer Walk With Thee."* Then they let loose with a sprightly march as they came away from the grave, blaring lively Dixieland tunes. The trumpets aimed heavenward, clarinets playing lower register, and the trombones flamed like burnished gold. The mourners strutted and trucked all along the band route. Friends had come from as far as England and as near as around the corner



Harold DeJean – Olympia Brass Band

– also in tribute were the bells from other churches in the city that began ringing – "there were the sounds of music everywhere."

The sun was bright, the earth damp from recent rains and the air clean and crisp. A young girl walking along with the band began to cry. The Grand Marshall leaned over and comforted her, saying, "The good Captain, he's gone home now." The procession headed for Third Street to the place where the Captain, his wife Mable, and their five children lived. Then, as the procession neared the house, a young boy broke from the procession and ran through the metal gate at 326 Third Street. He sat down on the steps of the small yellowish house. He was the grandson of Captain Handy, and this was his grandfather's house. It was the last house on the right, next to the ballpark where his children and grandchildren played.

Five hundred mourners were expected, but along the mile-and-a-half procession march, on both sides of the streets – were some 4,500 viewers and participants who gathered to watch as the brass band turned south and went to Second Street. The mourning procession then traveled more than a mile to the site of the Trinity Episcopal Church's Live Oak Cemetery where he was buried. Already waiting at the cemetery was a large group including musicians Freddie Minor and Buster Holmes from New Orleans. Freddie remarked that he had given John Handy the name of *Captain* in 1930, when before a large audience he yelled out, "Blow it Captain John Handy, blow it." The Jazz Great was even greater than he was aware – he was even eulogized in Life Magazine.

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Captain Handy was born into a musically acclaimed family. His mother was a pianist and his father, who led the first walking band in Pass Christian for 14 years, had various musical talents.

Capt. John Handy on Alto Sax

His younger brother Sylvester, played bass guitar, and his sister, Elizabeth, played the bass violin. Captain Handy started as a drummer and later, after going to New Orleans in 1918, to join the Tom Albert band, became a top-notch player of the clarinet.

While Captain Handy led his own band — the *Louisiana Shakers* in the early 1920s, he also sat in with such bands as Kit Howard's Brass, George Lewis and John Casimer's Tuxedo Band. He also played with Barry Martyn and Pete Marble – and was featured on many occasions at Preservation Hall in New Orleans with Kid Sheik's *Storyville Ramblers.*

The Handy Man in Japan

Captain Handy made one Far East Tour and two to Europe. In 1966, he traveled with Kid Sheik to England and Belgium and in 1967, with Sheik to Japan. He went again with the band in 1968, to England and Italy.

Handy and Lionel Hampton receive Italian Gold Medals

During his early career he played in the French Quarter and in places such as the "Hummingbird Cabaret," the "Pelican," and the "Astoria." As a recording artist, the English press wrote about his "Handyman Vol. 2" a followup to a previous recording released in Europe – as music that was hot and gutty, loosely New Orleans in style, but sufficiently personal in flavor to appeal to "jump-band" enthusiasts. Bearing such tunes as *Indiana – Dinah – Rosetta – C Blues – Stumblin' – Always Be in Love – Sleepy Time Gal – Body and Soul.* Accompanied with Dave Green on bass, Barry Martyn on drums, Pat Hawes at piano, Cuff Billett on trumpet, Richard Simmons at piano, Brian Turnock at bass,

Some of Handy's best friends were Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, Mahalia Jackson, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Lionel Hampton, and many other contemporary artists.

Music was not Captain Handy's only career. He once worked at Joy's Department Store in New Orleans and later, became a janitor at Tulane University. While there, he became a friend of Richard Allen, curator of the Archives of New Orleans Jazz. After his retirement from Tulane in 1963, Captain Handy returned to Pass Christian and indulged frequently in hunting and fishing, between cutting records and making overseas tours.

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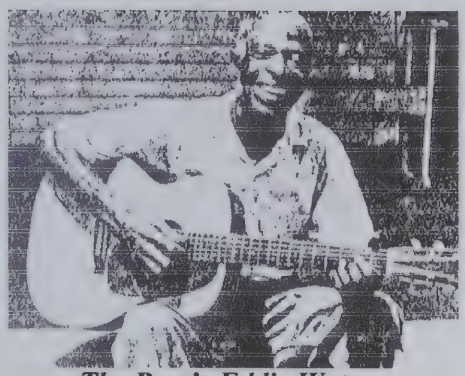
Handy was born June 24, 1900, the eldest son of John Handy, Sr. and Mrs Elizabeth Golden Handy. He was raised on Davis Avenue just a few doors from St. Paul's Methodist Church. (Note: There is no indication that John Handy was related to W.C. Handy who wrote *"St. Louis Blues."*)

When he was 12 years old he played as a percussionist in his father's band. Besides John, there was John Moliere on trumpet, Frank Toles on trombone, Willie Davies on guitar, Selvin Thomas at bass, and John Handy's father, Handy, Sr. on the violin. Young John also learned the mandolin – and at age 15, started a string trio with his two brothers, Sylvester playing the bass, and Julius playing the guitar. They played at the large Mexican Gulf Hotel located at Davis and Scenic Drive until it burned down in 1917 while being renovated.



The Pass's Eddie Watson

He then had learned the clarinet and played with his father's band again while also sitting in with Tom Albert at trumpet and Charlie Watson at drums. He then left Pass Christian along with Tom Albert to participate in Albert's new band along with Harrison Barnes at trombone, Clarence Vincent on banjo, and Shine Nolan on drums. After a few years he also sat in with the Chris Kelly Band. In 1924, he went to Baton Rouge to play in Tut Johnson's Band and the Steward Band. In 1927, he returned to New Orleans to play with Kid Rena and also with the Sam Morgan Band.

He played at the *Humming Bird Lounge* with trumpet player Guy Kelly, and with Henry Red Allen at the *Entertainer's Club* on Basin Street in 1927 and 1928. That is when he switched to the alto sax. He met with Avery Kid Howard while playing on the River boats, during which time he started his own band called the *"Louisiana Shakers"* with Kid Keifer, Edmond Battley, George Clark, Lionel Ferbois, Sidney Pfleuger, Henry Kimball, and Roy Evans.

Eddie Watson, guitarist from Pass Christian also joined the group in addition to John's brother Sylvester at bass.

In 1932, the *"Shakers"* regrouped with Alvin Alcorn on trumpet, Lee Collins on trumpet, Willie Padjeand on trumpet, Raymond Brown on trombone, Davey James on saxophone, Raymond Davis at piano, and Roy Evans on drums. They made tours throughout Louisiana and Texas and while at New Orleans they played at the *Pelican Club.* He eventually disbanded the *"Shakers"* for lack of success and also played at the *La Vida Dance Hall* while joining with Oscar "Papa" Celestin's band until 1941. Musicians in the group were Kid Clayton and Albert Walters on trumpet, Bill Matthews on trombone, John Handy on alto sax, Eddie Johnson on saxophone, Octave Crosby at piano, Richard Alexis on bass, and Albert Jiles on drums.

Kid Sheik Cola and Handy

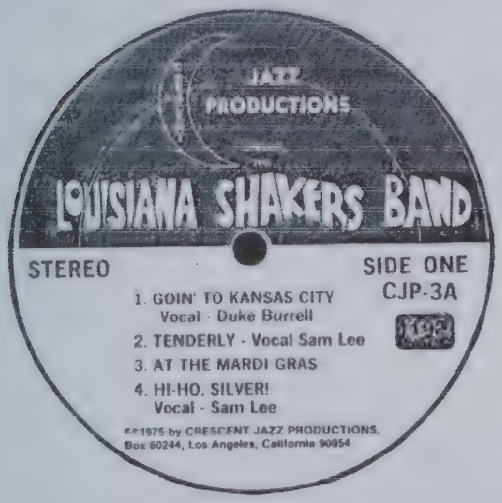
After taking off a few years of illness, he joined the *Young Tuxedo Brass Band* lead by John Casimir in the late 1940s. In 1952, Handy joined Kid Clayton's *"Happy Pals"* band and returned to Pass Christian after leaving that group. It wasn't until 1960 at age 60, did Handy sit in on his first recording — with Punch Miller and Paul Barnes. Captain John Handy had always played with great bands that had their music recorded, but Handy was never with any of the bands at the time of their recording sessions. This was unfortunate. But, as late in life as he did get started, he managed to record at least 10 records that can only be found in jazz collector's personal inventories . He also appeared in a 1964 Milwaukee NET television broadcast with the *Alvin Alcorn Jazz Band.*

Other recordings were made while he was on tour performing at concerts. One recording was known as *"The John and Mable (his wife) Handy Memorial Album."* He was picked up by RCA Studio and sent on tour through Canada with the *Keith Smith American All Stars,* composed of Keith Smith from England on trupmpet, Jimmy Archey on trombone, John Handy on alto sax, Lars Edegran (a Scandinavian) at piano, Ernie Johnson with banjo, Pops Foster on bass, and Freddy Moor on drums.

RCA Studio's Brad McCuen and Capt. John Handy in 1968.

While at Toronto, Handy recorded with the *Claude Hopkins Orchestra,* which included Doc Cheatham, Benny Morton, Scoville Brown, Claude Hopkins, Eddie Gibbs, and Gus Jonnson. Handy was prompted to let loose with such pieces as *Perdido, Handy's Gulf Coast Boogie*, and *One o'clock Jump*. His final televised sessions were with the *Preservation Hall Band* and the *Eureka Brass Band*, playing *Bourbon Street Parade, – I want a little Girl, – St. Louis Blues, – Lord, Lord, Lord, – Panama*, and *–Just a Closer Walk,* with Louis Armstrong singing.

Handy's style was different. His playing was considered to be robust in nature with his own unmistakable sound. In contrast to other old New Orleans veterans, he was completely sure of his music and his ability. He had a flair for *"rhythm and blues,"* a style that was later picked up by Earl Bostic and Louis Jordan.



John Handy's fame came late in life. It was during his last ten years from age 60 to 70 that he was able to assert himself and to become recognized internationally. The best known biographic study on him was written in German for his European enthusiasts. The German author, von Horst Herling, stated that Captain John Handy's influence to New Orleans Revival Jazz was better known in Europe than in the United States, and had hoped that his music style could be better appreciated.

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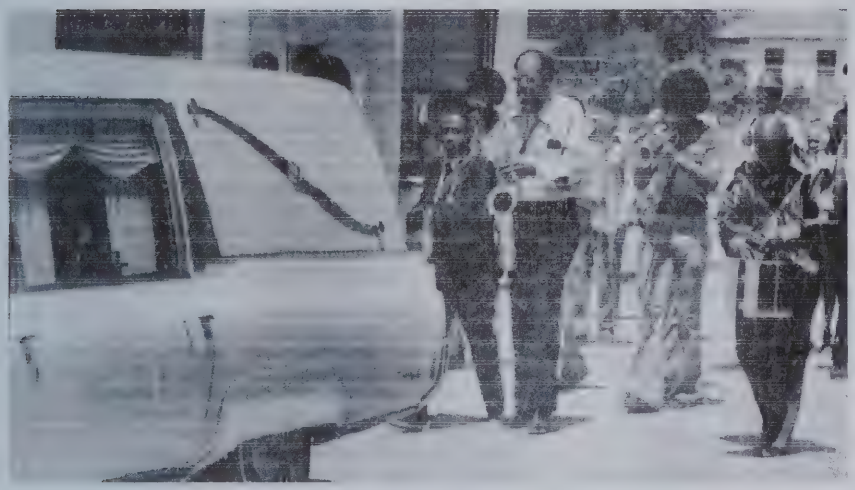
Close friends of Captain Handy were Joseph L. Jackson, (Joe B.) and Harry W. Fairconnetue. Both of them, in their own right, were great musicians who often played with Handy – professionally and while sitting in on social jam sessions.

Joseph L. "Joe B" Jackson

Joe B. Jackson was a famed jazz pianist, self taught by the age of 12, – who formed his own band that was known as *Jobie Jackson's Band*, featuring John Handy. Also, playing with the group were Harry Fairconnetue and Elsworth Collins, both of Bay St. Louis, Eddie Watson of Pass Christian, J.C. James of Gulfport, Harold Dejean of New Orleans, Charles Fairley of Moss Point, and James Baker. Jackson and Handy played together off and on for a period of more than 30 years.

"Joe B" Jackson



Jackson died on April 18, 1978, at the age of 64, while attending a city council meeting at Pass Christian City Hall. His wake and Mass services were held at Mother of Mercy Church followed by a Jazz procession that was participated in by hundreds jazz aficionados.

Like Handy, Joe B. also had other jobs when he wasn't playing music. He was employed by the L & N Railroad Company and would commute to New Orleans daily. This gave him time to play the late night gigs in New Orleans and at Gulf Coast clubs, and at the homes of friends and relatives. Jackson had another driving force, which was directed to political and civic activities – he was an ardent community activist.

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Harry W. Fairconnetue

Harry W. Fairconnetue was born in 1908 at Bay St. Louis where he attended highschool and went on to study at Xavier University in New Orleans. He was a member of the Clarence Desdone Band of New Orleans before lining up with Handy Man and his Sax for an extended period of time. His special instrument was the banjo. He followed his friends in death on February 13, 1980.

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In honor of Captain John Handy, Jr., the City of Pass Christian renamed Third Street to Handy Street which runs from Saucier Street eastward to the other side of Davis Avenue where it hits the Municipal Ballpark. It runs parallel to the L&N Railroad tracks located one block to the south. It is there that the Handy House still remains.

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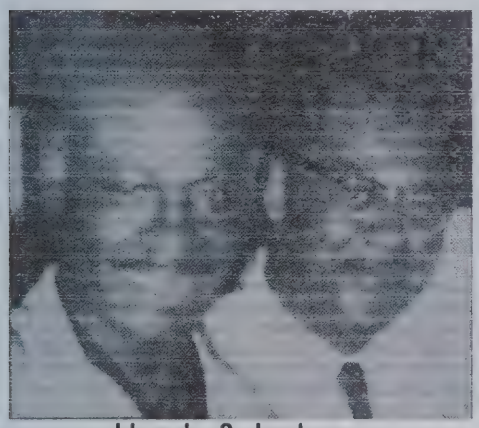
Memories Never Die



Handy & Jackson

A few years later, the first Jazz Festival in Pass Christian was held. The occasion commemorated both John Handy and "Joe B" Jackson – both Jazz Greats who lived as boyhood neighbors on Handy Street. Former jazz musician friends of the two arrived to participate – including reed men Kid Jordan and Joe Gordon, trombonist Lester Caliste, and trumpeter Clyde Kerr, Jr.

Bringing the music alive were string-man Julius Handy, the captain's only remaining brother and alto saxophonist John Handy III. The hall was jumping with strutting and darting umbrellas to the beat of "Down by the River Side," and other Handy favorites. The mixed Black and white crowd were "gittin' down to it" – clapping hands, foot-tapping and jiving.

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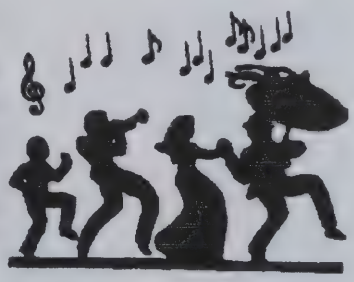
In 1999, as part of the Tricentennial activities for that year, the first "Jazz in the Pass" was held to honor the memories of Handy and Jackson. The music was brought back by former friends and relatives who played the unforgettable jazz tunes that had many dancing in Memorial Park as others pulled out their umbrellas and joined in hours of fun and "Second-Lining."



Although aged 70 at his death, the Handy Man's fame climaxed during his last ten years of life. The influence of his New Orleans Revival Jazz style became world famous.

It was also John Handy who put the saxophone into its proper light as a mainstream Jazz sound. Because of him, many old veterans switched to the alto sax in emulation of Handy's style. Some of these were Leroy Robinet, Louis Cottrell, Paul Barnes, Ruben Roddy, the English musician, Sammy Rimmington, and the German, Peter Müller. Famed Handy tradition numbers such as *Handy's Boogie Woogie* and *Cap'n's Blues* are still played 'round the Jazz-world.

DeeDee Pierce at trumpet, Kid Martyn on drums, and Capt. John Handy with altoSax.

DeeDee Pierce and Handy

Preservation Hall at New Orleans

Kid Martyn and Handy

Maybel and John Handy at home in the Pass.

Handy and Jazz Promoter

"Capt. John Handy – der JazzFreund"

by von Horst Herling

This is the cover of a book that was written by German Jazz enthusiast von Horst Herling about the life of John Handy. The book, written in the German language was entitled *"Capt. John Handy – der JazzFreund"*

It was a demonstration of the vast enthusiasm that was heralded in European circles in their acclaim for what Herling referred to as the master of "New Orleans Revival Jazz."

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The book was written in 1978, and was later translated to rough draft form – by someone probably from New Orleans.

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He had a flair for "rhythm and blues," – a style that was later picked up by Earl Bostic and Louis Jordan.

Dan Ellis -- *Community Historicizer*

Lauder of Local Legacies

Dan Ellis's presentation of historic facts is unique in its format. Historic data is arranged into chronological categories and themes complete with photographs, maps, and interviews. A reader can pick up one of his books and start reading from any page, because each segment is a different story. He says that he derived this format from when he was a history teacher and taught his students to learn how each episode in life is a separate story. His first meaningful book was written as a highschool teacher when charged by the school system to teach a course in "Americanism vs Communism." At that time, there was no text book, so he had to perform extensive research as well as to write the book.

As a pioneer in the early days of computers, Ellis was a principal in a company that sold time and services on a very large computer system. As his customers began installing their own computers, they would induce his computer operators and programmers to join their staff. This opened a new door for Ellis. He opened a training center for entry level personnel to fill computer positions in local businesses, hospitals, banks, and government facilities. In this endeavor, there were no text books, so Ellis created the training manuals in addition to drafting documentation for software programs. With the introduction of personal computers in the early 80s, Ellis once more took the challenge and revised his old text manuals to conform to training eager, novice executives and professionals seeking to install their own computer systems.

In 1990, Ellis established permanent residence at his weekend Pass Christian home. His interest in writing lead to publishing vignette columns in local newspapers. Upon writing his first histories, he realized the significant extent of misinformation. This resulted in his seeking primary source information from archival records in Mobile, Alabama; Jackson, Mississippi; New Orleans, Louisiana; and from local courthouses and churches.

Ellis's books are filled with treasured photographs and maps; and he takes special effort to seek out individuals, whether obscure or prominent, who can add a touch of personal experience by revealing anecdotal interviews.

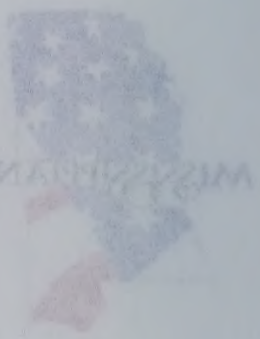
Not being able to find a publisher, Ellis was determined to get his history books to the general public, so he learned to be a self-publisher and now distributes his history books through bookstores and gift shops. His first published book was on *Diamondhead* followed by "Pass Christian Discovered," "Bay St. Louis/Hancock Discovered," "Gulfport Discovered," "Kiln Kountry – *Home of Brett Favre*," "Slidell – *Camellia City*," "Pass Christian - *Historic District*." Pertaining to the whole Coast area, he has written "Mississippi Gulf Coast – *a Panorama*," "All About Camille – *the Storm*" and "Lighthouses and Islands – *of the Gulf*." He looks forward to writing other histories of those towns that do not have updated history books, such as D'Iberville, Ocean Springs, and Pascagoula in Mississippi and other West Florida communities in Louisiana.

As a Journalist, he has written columns in such periodicals as Citibusiness News in New Orleans, Coast Business, Gulf Coast Good News, and the Progress. He has been Editor of several News Letters such as the Mississippi AARP Quarterly, the Pass Christian Tricentennial, the Pass Christian Lighthouse Society, and currently the Timber Ridge Reporter in Pass Christian. He has also self published a number of topical Heritage Booklets.

Ellis's books sell for under $20 and are computerized in order to enable easy updating and error corrections when found. He calls himself an *Historiographer and Scrutinier*, which simply translates to a "writer of history with authenticity." Dan Ellis may be contacted at 225 Fairway Drive, Pass Christian, MS, 39571 – 228-452-3138 – danellis3@juno.com – and a number of self-designed web sites can be found through his domain site at http://danellis.net.

Dan Ellis -- Community Historicer

Candidate at Canal Exposition



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